

Using Role Play in Middle-School and Secondary Classes

Asia Wilson

I can still remember my seventh grade research project on Egypt in vivid detail. My friend Susan and I immersed ourselves in ancient Egyptian customs and brought the mummification procedure to life for our attentive eleven and twelve-year-old colleagues, and a very stunned teacher, Ms. Herbert. We worked on the project for weeks, readying and planning. We constructed, with the help of jigsaw and parents, a wooden pyramid that opened up on a hinge to reveal various levels, pathways, and tombs. We outlined our exhaustive notes on an ancient scroll reaching from floor to ceiling, burned and stained for authenticity's sake; and we guarded our mysterious hush-hush performance with intense secrecy.

When the big day arrived, we stood in front of our class with a giant ornate coffin looming in the background—a construction of cardboard, paint, glitter, stones, and Egyptian script. Inside the coffin, and scattered about us, were canopic jars filled with jewels and innards—hearts, livers, and intestines from our small town Supervalu butcher. A large table sat at centre stage, adorned with a sheet for our embalming ritual. My little sister's giant life-size Jill doll was the focal point—she was our cadaver. Hours before we had cut open the back of her head and chest and filled her with chicken livers and beef kidneys—she was set, and so were we. The role-play was about to begin.

I still remember Ms. Herbert's eyes opening larger and larger as my grandmother's knitting needle became our dissecting instrument: insert carefully through the nose, hook the gooey insides and pull, then place in jars to preserve for the afterlife. We prepared our body meticulously; and then we anointed it and wrapped it. Amazing, after all these years, I can still remember every step. Why? Because I was invested in my project with a degree of intensity that far surpassed any question and answer worksheet.

I was recently telling my students about my Egypt project, and they recounted how their seventh grade teacher had mummified a chicken in the classroom. They all remembered, with bright and energetic eyes, every detail of the procedure.

How very different this experience was from simply reading an encyclopedia account such as “The mummification process varied from age to age in Egypt, but it always involved removing the internal organs, treating the body with resin, and wrapping it in linen bandages.” I wasn't just reading about Egypt; I was recreating Egypt. I became an Egyptian immersed in ancient traditions. I too worried about the afterlife. I too wondered what I might be able to take with me when I die. I too wondered about how, where, and if I wanted to be buried. I was part of a story: a human story that involves billions of people.

But why did I need to rip apart the chest cavity of a doll and stuff it with animal innards to connect with Egyptian rituals and customs? Why wasn't I satisfied with simply reading the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and writing a report? The answer to this lies

in the fact that, in the seventh grade, I was fully engaged in developing my *romantic* toolkit. At the age of eleven, I was in the prime of *romantic* understanding. I was drawn to everything bizarre, sensational, and exotic. I was fascinated with the extremes of real life experiences that existed outside my zone of familiarity. Anything that allowed me to reach beyond my small, home-town world was intriguing, especially a past culture whose people preserved bodies in strange and wondrous ways. I was absolutely engrossed with my grandma's knitting needle and what it could do to a dead human body. Can you imagine that people actually shoving a hooked instrument (much like the one I held in my hand for my presentation) up a dead person's nose? Gross. Cool. No way. Eye-popping. BIZARRE!

I possessed a number of other cognitive tools in addition to my ready focus on extremes that kindled my fascination with Egyptian life. Children immersed in *romantic* understanding are intrigued with building collections of things and devoting time to hobbies. They also understand things in terms of human meaning and emotion, embed knowledge in narrative understanding, become fascinated with gathering information, and foster the embryonic tools of abstract thinking. My study of Egyptian burial customs allowed me to securely understand the topic by putting immense intellectual energy into an exhaustive search of everything related to it. I was enthralled with diagrams that outlined the mummification process and ancient tombs. I was intrigued by a list that itemized the kinds of things that Egyptians buried with their dead. But I wasn't only immersed in the when, where, and how of ancient Egyptian customs—my investigation helped me to understand why. Why did these human beings preserve the dead so carefully? Their customs reflected their fears of the unknown and their beliefs in an afterlife (knowledge embedded in human meaning and emotion). I had been raised Catholic, so their ideas had never entered my cognitive world; but I was beginning to ponder how all of this related to my own beliefs—would people centuries from now see my beliefs as strange and bizarre? Were my beliefs simply mythical? The role-play activity allowed me to explore these beliefs, and my imagination allowed me to expand my intellectual horizons while simultaneously experiencing what was not really present. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines role-play as “the adoption or enactment of a role.” Role-play is one of the most engaging instruments for imagining what is not actually present. It was the integral binding agent of my seventh grade performance as an Egyptian embalmer. Role-play traverses and incorporates all of the Romantic toolkit categories. I exhaustively researched details, examined symbolic forms, and wondered about every feature of the mummification process in order to play the role of an ancient Egyptian.

Role-play can take a variety of forms: student(s) enacting; teacher(s) enacting; and student(s) and teacher(s) enacting together.

While some of my elementary school teachers engaged in role-play—one played the wacky scientist and another donned the garb of a traditional Japanese woman—and other teachers at university had students perform skits and plays (Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, for example), role-play was the exception, rather than the norm. I seldom remember any secondary teachers of mine adopting roles; nor do I remember them asking us to. None of my social studies teachers donned the uniform of a World War II soldier, for instance, nor asked us to imagine that we were on the front lines. I am not sure why. They should have. It’s not difficult.

In this article, I will examine a number of different ways for teachers to incorporate role-play in their classrooms to make student learning more participatory, stimulating, and imaginative. My work with a broad range of students over the past five years, in terms of age and ability, has allowed me to see that role-play works with students of all ages.

Role-Play in Elementary and Middle Schools

Jane Elliott, a third grade teacher in Riceville, Iowa, delivered one of the most fascinating examples of learning through role-play. On a Friday morning in April of 1968, the day after Martin Luther King was assassinated, Elliott decided to teach her third graders a lesson about discrimination. She didn’t simply want them to know what the word meant; she wanted them to understand how it felt. Elliott divided her students, according to eye color, into two groups: blue eyes and brown eyes. William Peters (1987) explains:

On the first day, the blue-eyed children were told they were smarter, nicer, neater, and better than those with brown eyes. Throughout the day, Elliott praised them and allowed them privileges such as a taking a longer recess and being first in the lunch line. In contrast, the brown-eyed children had to wear collars around their necks and their behavior and performance were criticized and ridiculed by Elliott. On the second day, the roles were reversed and the blue-eyed children were made to feel inferior while the brown eyes were designated the dominant group.

What happened over the course of the unique two-day exercise astonished both students and teacher. On both days, children who were designated as inferior took on the look and behavior of genuinely inferior students, performing poorly on tests and other work. In contrast, the “superior” students -- students who had been sweet and tolerant before the exercise -- became mean-spirited and seemed to like discriminating against the “inferior” group.

Elliott repeated the lesson in 1970, live in front of rolling cameras. The film footage makes stunning viewing. The children in Elliott’s class turn into absolute monsters. In the shadow of “God Bless America,” little John tells Elliott what happened at recess: “Russell called me names and I hit him. Hit him in the gut.” He had hit Russell because Russell called him ‘Brown eyes.’ Another child chimes in, “They always call us that.” Elliott asks, “What’s wrong

with being called brown eyes?” Roy offers a shocking explanation: “‘It means we’re stupider.’” In an even more appalling response, Raymond says, “I felt like I was—like a king, like I ruled them brown-eyes, like I was better than them, happy.”

I will not summarize the whole lesson. Suffice to say that when teacher and students debrief after the lesson, *all* of the children are anxious to discard their collars (one uses his teeth in a kind of symbolic deconstruction of the event). And when Jane Elliott says, “I hate today,” Rex agrees, “I hate it too.”

The lesson left a life-long impression on all of Elliott’s pupils. Years later, when the third graders are fully grown adults, they reunite with Elliott to reminisce on the blue-eyed/brown-eyed exercise. One student, named Sandra, tells Elliott

You hear these people talking about different people and how they’d like to have them out of the country. And sometimes I just wish I had that collar in my pocket. I could whip it out and put it on and say ‘Wear this, and put yourself in their place.’ I wish they would go through what I went through, you know.

It’s amazing to me that being told one is inferior can have such a tremendous impact on one’s behavior. The lesson taken from a role-play such as this could never be gleaned from simply reading didactic materials that espouse the Golden Rule. Elliott has also performed her lesson with adults, and they act equally as monstrously as the children.

It was this Frontline documentary, coupled with a barrage of anti-Arab sentiments after 9/11, that prompted me to design and implement an exercise similar to Elliott’s. After 9/11, friends of mine—Arab friends—started being treated differently. People glanced at them apprehensively in airports; and news reports of Arabs being accosted for no reason began to surface more and more frequently. My sixth grade students might learn something important, I thought, from a lesson similar to Elliott’s.

I was committed to helping my students understand the notion of empathy. I presented them with numerous narratives—contexts from which they could form an understanding of stereotypes, bias, racism, prejudice, etc. We watched the documentary, *A Class Divided*; read children’s books like Maxine Trottier’s *Flags*; and studied newspaper articles; but there was always something missing. I wanted them to feel prejudice; I wanted them to feel singled out and feel persecuted as a group. I wanted them to feel what it feels like to be cast as “other.” So, I decided to intern them in a concentration camp—a lesson I had tried out during my teacher training. It had worked effectively with my adult colleagues.

In the morning, students were divided into families and given paper suitcases. (I had one of my parent volunteers make these—they are a little labor intensive, if you want, as I did, to have authentic copies of historical passports and baggage tags attached to them. The National Nikkei Heritage Centre in Burnaby, British Columbia supplied pictures and information). They were also each given an internment notice. Each family was given an envelope. Inside the envelopes were pieces of paper scrawled with words

denoting various family owned and personal items; for example, a teddy bear, photo albums, grandma's jewelry, clothing, furniture, hardware store, etc. The families had to decide what to pack and why. The rule was that whatever they wanted to keep had to fit inside the suitcase, and there was only one suitcase per person. "What's this for, Ms. Wilson?" students asked. "Just pack your bag—you have fifteen minutes to decide what to take," I answered. "Where are we going? How long are we going for?" "Just pack your bag." When they were done, they went out for recess.

When students came back to class, things had changed. I had changed. Students had always moved freely in and out of the classroom, but not today. I stood at the door, in uniform, holding a clip-board. I spoke harshly and looked severe: "TWO LINES! BOYS, THIS SIDE. GIRLS, HERE. SILENCE!!" Anyone who whispered was severely chastised. I came, two inches from a talker's face, glared, and hissed in a venomous tone, "You don't want to know what will happen if you can't be quiet." Even though they had some idea of what I was doing—they had seen *A Class Divided*, we'd talked about concentration camps, and I'd shown them pictures of a trip I made to Dachau—they were clearly shaken. They later told me that they thought I was really angry: "Your eyes... Your voice... You were so scary..."

The students stood in the hall, and no one moved. I began, with the aid of my helper, to finish what I'd started: taking all of their personal belongings from their desks—book bags and all—and throwing every last bit of everything they owned, except their suitcases, into the hallway under a "For Sale" sign. One student's protest was met with a glare. Their faces showed evident signs of apprehension.

Students with their suitcases in hand were marched in silence to an imaginary bus outside that I made from chairs, paper wheels, etc. On the bus, I continued to play the role of an officer. I told them their numbers (their names were no longer important), and they were given ID tags. I then told them to close their eyes; and I took them on a visual simulation of our travel experience to an internment camp.

We returned to the classroom. The desks, which they take a great deal of ownership over, were stacked to the side. A divider separated the room, and there was a black banner covering one length of wall. It was plastered with startling images: faces of concentration camp victims, evacuation notices, "Work will set you free" and other mottos. I posed in front of them with a hard, stern look, and I ordered the men and women into separate camps where they took seats according to their numbers. Boys sat on one side of the divider; girls on the other. I then turned on the film, *Daniel's Story*.

Even as adults, it is difficult to walk through a concentration camp with its gas chambers, scientific experimentation rooms, and horrifying images. *Daniel's Story* was created specifically to educate children about the camps. It follows one boy, Daniel, through the Holocaust. It is moving, but not as graphic as many of the other films on the topic.

When it was over, the children wrote "in role." I asked a few

simple questions: How did you feel today (about being given the internment notice, packing your bag, being taken to a camp and treated like nothing)? Imagine if this really happened? How might it have felt to be Daniel? Obviously, this lesson was followed with a debriefing period and a number of accompanying activities.

The role-plays I have discussed are humanities-based ones as this is my primary area of interest. However, elementary and carefully configured middle schools lend themselves well to interdisciplinary study. I want to look at two examples here: one integrates the sciences with the arts; the other merges all subject areas into one.

Anne-Marie Dooner, a teacher in Winnipeg, Manitoba, is doing some particularly fascinating work that can be used to amalgamate science and English language arts curricula. Dooner implements extraordinary role-play scenarios in her teaching. Once students have covered a number of scientific concepts related to their studies of particle theory, the students become actual particles—the particles "talk and interact with each other" in plays or puppet shows. Students write and perform skits that integrate sophisticated concepts such as conductivity, kinetic energy, and the expansion and contraction of matter. Dooner is often faced with the students' desire to tell the story of the particles. But Dooner does not allow her students "to distance themselves from the action"; instead, she challenges them to put themselves in role. And they do—by representing various concepts through their particles' speeches, actions, and dress. She takes this one step further when students create "a 'love story' (of great attraction and of great heartbreak) as particles become either solutions... or heterogeneous mixtures."

Even more fascinating is Dooner's role-play of the heart-system—a role-play that involves her entire class.

After learning about specific white blood cells (lymphocyte B and T cells, neutrophils, macrophages) and the action of antigens, we learn how they circulate in our body both through the lymphatic and the circulatory systems. Once the kids have learned specifically about the system of the heart and how blood travels, we transform our entire classroom into the heart system (picture it... lots of tarps, only flash-lights... with kids making the pumping and gushing sounds associated with the workings of the heart...). The classroom door becomes the inferior and superior vena cava. People that show up (this is during Halloween so other classes are invited to participate) become antigens entering the body. The antigens travel through shaking tables covered with cloths that act as the right atrium and ventricle (and kids who act as the tricuspid valve allow them to pass...). Using tarps, the antigens travel by means of the pulmonary artery while kids acting as lymphocytes (B and T) and neutrophils hide and try to attack the antigens (respectfully). Kids (with fans and billowing cloths) become the lungs (take in bossy) and order the blood to rid itself of CO₂ and take in O₂. The antigens (by this time, usually frightened...) then

move through the pulmonary vein and enter the left atrium and ventricle with kids acting as the mitral valve (allowing the antigens to pass to the ventricles). Finally, the antigens make their way into the aorta where nutrients in the blood demand that the blood (and the antigens) make their way to the tissues (and out the classroom door). The antigens are usually being chased by a lymphocyte or two... (A.M. Dooner, personal communication, December 14, 2005)

Just imagine the endless possibilities that one could tie into such a lesson! A student could imagine herself in the role of a reporter—shrunk down to a microscopic size—reporting back on her voyages through different bodies (a healthy body, a heavy smoker's body, etc.). Imagine the interest and excitement that such an activity would generate: "The most fascinating part of my voyage..." "I was terribly frightened when..." "I was shocked and horrified to find..." When students become experts in an area of study they feel intelligent, empowered, and invigorated; their thirst for knowledge grows because learning itself is a joy—both challenging and rewarding.

Fresh from student teaching, I began my teaching career at a middle school with some amazingly creative and energetic teachers. In the last two weeks of the school year, our team (composed of four classes) integrated all the academic subjects, art, and physical education into an intensive role-play activity dubbed "Utopia." Along with current events, we had been examining ancient civilizations and world cultures. We pondered such questions as: Why do civilizations form? Why do global organizations exist? How can we make our world function more effectively? Why do wars happen? Utopia is a highly elaborate role-play that pushes students to explore how and why the world exists as it does and how, or if, we can create a more utopian world for ourselves.

Each classroom became a continent; and each continent subdivided into seven countries composed of groups of four students. Students were given information cards outlining the various particulars of their imaginary nations—natural resources, fertile lands, water resources, etc. They named their countries, designed flags, composed national anthems, and drew up laws. We held international meetings to debate global political issues, and countries competed against one another in the Olympic Games. Each nation created their own national sport.

Students also performed tasks in order to accumulate revenue. For example, they designed and sold products, based on the natural resources of their country, to other people in the world. All students voted on which products they would buy; and countries were awarded resources based on the voting results. This revenue came in the guise of resources: students received cards with cattle, hay, water, and gas stamped upon them. Countries had to "trade" cards with each other to reach the utopian state of having enough food, water, shelter, environmental protection, and natural resources for everyone.

Then, disaster struck. Students rolled the dice of chance. Some countries were hit with natural disasters while others lost their harvests because of drought. Soon, war followed. Countries were

allowed to attack one another (using dice—highest rollers win) to win resources. Some countries got selfish. They wanted more than enough cards and didn't care that other countries were poverty stricken. Some countries, however, shared with others. Our debriefing exercises after this activity were fascinating. I am proud to say that a number of my students figured out that there was enough for all if they shared—no one had to go without. The green-eyed monster was, however, rampant at times; and students looked at their own wars as microcosms of those in history.

Throughout this article, I have discussed one teaching tool: role-play—it is, by no means, the only one. In order to be effective teachers, as Leier (2005) notes, we need "to use a range of teaching methods, from lectures to dramatic readings to films to singing to creative assignments, from using primary documents such as diaries to using the internet." In addition to this, we need to ensure that we awaken a sense of wonder in students by making the topics we choose to teach alive and exciting. Luckily, human history has been and continues to be plagued with strange and weird occurrences. It takes very little to inspire human beings to commit atrocious acts of violence/degradation or to immerse themselves in bizarre experiments. The list is inexhaustible—the regimes of Stalin and Hitler, the marriages of Henry VIII, sending monkeys into space, cannibalism, scientific cloning experiments. Even the things that we take for granted today such as cars, bicycles, airplanes were once thought to be strange and different ideas. It's not hard to find something that will fascinate one's audience. Virtually anything can be fascinating with a little bit of wonder and a touch of role-play.

REFERENCES

- Egan, K. (1997). *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Egan, K. (2005). *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fluxgold, H. (2005). "Honouring Excellence in Teaching: Mark Leier." *Simon Fraser News*. Vol. 32, no. 2. January 27, 2005. <http://www.sfu.ca/mediapr/sfu_news/archives/sfunews01270509.html> Accessed 10 December 2005.
- Leier, M. (2005). "Making History Vibrant and Important." *SFU News*: January 27, 2005. <http://www.sfu.ca/mediapr/sfu_news/regular_features/comment01130502.htm> Accessed 10 December 2005.
- "mummy." *Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia*. 2005 Encyclopaedia Britannica Premium Service. <<http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article-9372811>> Accessed 5 Nov. 2005.
- Peters, W. (1987) *A Class Divided: Then and Now*. New Haven: Yale University Press. See also <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divide>